Crimes of the Classroom

By Glenn Oakley

She said her teacher was, "a parent, a friend, a confidant. ... He was the greatest." Minutes later she asked the judge to see that former Meridian school science teacher and coach Daniel Douglas Campbell is never released from prison for what he did to her and other girls.

The girl was one of three whom Campbell befriended while teaching at Lowell Scott Junior High School and Centennial High School, initiated a relationship with and impregnated. He posed as their father to obtain abortions for the girls. Charges that Campbell had sex with other female students were dropped in a plea bargain.

The Campbell case has been highly publicized, but it is just one of an increasing number of sexual abuse cases in Idaho involving teachers.

As this story is written, Campbell has been sentenced to 15 years to life on charges of statutory rape and lewd and lascivious conduct with students; Emmett High School teacher Donald Zaph has been sentenced to up to 15 years in prison for seducing and sexually abusing female students; and Robert Kesler, former Horseshoe Bend School superintendent, is awaiting trial for sexual misconduct with a former student.

The pattern in these cases and others cropping up throughout Idaho and the rest of the country is similar. Social workers, prosecutors and education officials say that often the accused teacher is well-liked by the students and may in fact be one of the most effective educators on the staff.
These are often the ones who “showed up early, stayed late and were popular with the kids,” says Mike Friend, former director of teacher certification and now director of the Idaho Association of School Administrators.

The teacher may be a bit of a loner, but often is married and considered perfectly normal. BSU alum and therapist Chris Paul Nelson has treated three teachers convicted of abusing minors. “Two were homosexual pedophiles,” he says. “Both were married with kids. Neither had abused their own kids.”

The allegations may start with one student making the accusation of sexual abuse — but more students soon step forward or are discovered to also have been sexually molested by the teacher.

There may be dozens of students abused by a single teacher. “Very seldom is the case where the offender hasn’t abused more kids at a variety of ages,” says Nelson. “We find their history [of abuse] is incredibly long.”

Ada County deputy prosecutor Jay Rosenthal concurs. “They will claim one victim,” he says. “When you hook them up to a polygraph, the victims pour out.”

At first, the charges seem unbelievable. “There are a large number of people who go to the support of the accused,” says Rosenthal, who has specialized in child sexual abuse cases for 15 years. “They cannot believe it. This is a crime not committed by any particular segment of the population. These aren’t guys with tattoos from head to toe, riding Harleys. Most of the people I prosecute are highly regarded in their profession.”

The molested students, on the other hand, may be problem kids. Rosenthal says that, “Children who have been sexually abused may have substance [abuse] problems, conduct problems, family problems — running away. They become to the lay person little delinquents.”

To Boise State social work professor Mardell Nelson, “The symptoms that make them not credible are the symptoms that say something is very, very wrong.”

If the general public does not recognize children at risk of sexual abuse, child molesters do. Chris Nelson says the offenders often seek out vulnerable children — those lacking the love and nurturing normally associated with family life. Speaking about one teacher who preyed on fifth and sixth grade boys, he says, “He knew whether or not the parents came in. ... The kids were at risk to begin with.”

And when it comes to girls, “They will label the victim some sort of Lolita,” says Mardell Nelson. “Once victimized, people will continue to play out a victim role,” she says. “They are undernurtured, inadequately parented and eroticized.”

And Rosenthal explains, “It’s not like the classic rape victim where it’s violent sex. They groom them. Sex becomes the only way they get attention. That’s easily spotted by someone who is an abuser.”

Ken Patterson, a BSU alum and administrator of the Division of Family and Children’s Services for the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, says, “Sexual contact can be pleasurable for kids.”

That pleasure adds to the guilty feelings commonly held by sexual abuse victims. Young girls in particular may think they are in love with their molesters. It is not unheard of for young girls to end up marrying their teachers after years of sexual molestation.

Rosenthal says junior high school is where most sexual abuse cases involving teachers occur. “Junior high is one of the most vulnerable times,” he explains. “Both boys and girls, but particularly girls, have bodies that are way ahead of their minds. Girls tend to idolize their junior high school teachers.”

In junior high, says Rosenthal, “Girls have no male peers. Their male classmates tend to be emotionally and physically behind them.”

Rosenthal says the “breaking down of barriers” in the school by the teachers can lead to sexual contact. “There are off-color comments in the class, allowing teasing that goes to a sexual nature, special privileges [such as] being made teacher’s aide. They develop a familiarization with them. All of a sudden teachers and students are talking about overt sexual activity.”

Such publicity generated by recent cases cause many to wonder if the schools to which they entrust their children are safe, and how such teachers go undetected. The answers are not simple.

“I really believe Idaho students are as safe from that [sexual molestation] as any students anywhere,” says BSU’s acting associate dean of education Pat Bieter. Idaho Education Association director Chuck Lentz says, “Probably they’re safer in school than they are anywhere else in society.”

Safety is necessarily considered in relative terms. But according to current statistics, America is not a very safe place for kids. Nationally, says Nelson, “One in four girls are sexually abused by 13; one in seven before age 18 for boys. The average age for most children to be abused is nine, and it’s getting younger.”

Experts agree the number of reported sexual abuse cases, including those involving teachers, is increasing dramatically. Most attribute the rise to increased awareness and reporting. “This is such a cultural taboo,” says Mardell Nelson, “that only in the last 25 years has it been dealt with as an issue.”

So there has been prevalent sexual abuse in this country for some time. But when a schoolteacher is tried for sexual abuse of students, the story becomes front page news. “You’ll hear a real frustration among teachers that it occurs other places too,” says Friend. “And it’s true. How many accountants sexually abuse kids? I don’t know. But when you certify as a teacher there are certain commitments you make and one of them is the health, safety and welfare of children. That makes education unique when our clientele are children.”

The initial screening for prospective teachers takes place in the college classroom. “The primary screener is academic,” says Bieter, adding that “Every professor has the right to red-flag an applicant’s file [indicating] that this professor has a question about the student.”

“The hardest part is to substantiate the feeling and not violate the civil rights of the students. It’s an intuitive process rather than an empirical process. How do you describe somebody playing off-key?”

Bieter says in his 22 years of teaching, “I have red-flagged maybe half a dozen. In all cases these students were denied access to the field for various reasons.”

Boise District schools run police background checks on prospective teachers, but no district in the state runs FBI fingerprint
check, and not all districts conduct police backgrounds. All teachers are asked on their teacher certification application if they have ever been arrested for anything other than minor violations.

Lentz says the IEA is opposed to fingerprinting teachers. “We view it as an unnecessary invasion of privacy — a presumption of guilt. And it’s ineffective. If there were a criminal record there would be no [teaching] certificate.”

That is probably true for Idaho, but in other state teachers with criminal records have managed to slip through the system. Recently reported cases include David Thicken, school counselor and head football coach at Jonathan Alder High School in Plain City, Ohio. He is a convicted felon, ex-prison inmate and former patient at a maximum security mental hospital for criminals.

Another Ohio teacher, Gregory Barnhart, received a teaching certificate one year after pleading guilty to a charge of sexual battery. “In a state like Idaho, if a person has been convicted in Boise, the chance that person being hired is remote to nil,” says Friend. “But could a person come in from the outside?”

State Department of Education professional standards administrator Jim Smith says Idaho school districts are required to inform his department if their teachers are released or fired. They then investigate and determine if the teacher’s certificate should be revoked. Revocation is a lengthy process ultimately voted on by the Board of Education. Criminal conviction almost always is cause for revocation, but is not automatic.

The Department of Education also investigates allegations of violations of the teacher’s code of ethics, which includes sexual misconduct.

Ironically, says Smith, “The big cases you hear about like Campbell haven’t even been turned in to us [by the school districts].”

In part because school districts do not always immediately report problems with teachers, Smith monitors criminal cases that may involve teachers by reading newspaper articles from a clipping service. Any teacher on trial for a crime would presumably be identified as a teacher in the newspaper.

But only 12,000 of the 25,000-30,000 teachers who have received certificates in the state are employed as teachers. If an accountant with a teaching certificate were convicted of sexual molestation, the Department of Education would have no way of knowing the accountant should have his certificate revoked.

If a teacher did have a certificate revoked, says Smith, “He may apply for a certificate in another state and say no on the felony question. Chances are he wouldn’t get checked and could just start all over again.”

However, the Department of Education is tied into a national network containing the names of all teachers who have had their certificates revoked.

But Ada County detective Ken Smith says, “The bigger issue is when a school lets a teacher go for inappropriate behavior. They want to take the easy way out. And another school hires them.”

Specific cases are hard to come by, but several people involved in the issue believe problem teachers are indeed passed to other schools.

“That has happened on frequent occasions,” says Rosenthal. “People pass these people on.”

Says Jim Smith, “We don’t know it’s happened, but it’s safe to assume it has happened. We’ve probably picked up a few like that.”

Patterson agrees, saying, “Districts have tended to handle them [sexual abuse allegations] internally to save the school embarrassment, to save the community embarrassment.”

But, Rosenthal says, “I think it’s going to be less of a problem because the solution is civil litigation. And God help the school district who lets it happen...”

The Meridian school district is facing a swarm of civil suits stemming from the Campbell case. Emmett faces civil suits resulting from the Zaph case. Rosenthal says because of fear of lawsuits and a growing awareness of sexual abuse by teachers, “Most districts have become pretty hand-nosed about conduct.”

Lentz says at the IEA, “We caution teachers: Don’t touch children. And we leave it to their personal judgment. Our task is to warn them that physical contact with a student can lead to allegations.”

Rosenthal says the lack of warmth in schools is “one of the unfortunate realities of a few bad apples... I think junior high is going to become a non-touching area for students and teachers.”

But Lentz himself is uncomfortable with the warnings. “There’s a certain sadness to it all. That puts [teaching] in a very clinical environment. Young children need to be touched, want to be touched.”

Patterson says fear of touching is “an over-reaction. Nobody’s going to get charged for hugging too tight. Healthy adults with healthy attitudes toward kids can still hug.”

Because many schools are now teaching personal safety classes, says Patterson, “We’re raising a generation of kids who have a better set of social skills to know if somebody is trying to become inappropriately sexual with them. I think [schools] are becoming safer all the time.”

And as bad as the publicity is surrounding sexual abuse cases by teachers, that very publicity may help curb the problem. “When the Campbell case hits the paper every certificate holder in the state feels it,” says Friend. “It affects everybody. But if we ever really want to deal with the problem, it can’t be dealt with in isolation.”

EXPerts Advise: Communicate!

Communication with your child is primary in not only detecting molestation, but in preventing sexual abuse, experts say.

As social work professor Mardell Nelson notes, molesters hand select their victims, choosing those who are unlikely to tell their parents. They choose children who seek the love and warmth and communication they may be lacking at home.

The National Center on Child Abuse & Neglect provides guidelines for parents of younger children, encouraging parents to:

• “Talk to your child every day and take time to really listen and observe. Learn as many details as you can about your child’s activities and feelings. Encourage him or her to share concerns and problems.
• Explain that your child’s body belongs only to them and that he or she has the right to say ‘no’ to anyone who might try to touch them.
• Explain that some adults may threaten children by saying that their parents may be hurt or killed if the child ever shares the secret.

In most cases involving junior high and high school students, the molester is manipulating the child, and the child, however unwittingly, is a participant and will often express love for the perpetrator. These victims rarely tell their parents, says Nelson. Thus it is incumbent upon the parent to work on open communication and to be observant. □